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NATO and Turkey: No Longer the Silent Ally

A new strategic concept that will define the next 10 years of NATO is nowhere in sight.

This week's NATO leaders summit in London will be more significant than many before it. Not because there are a number of international challenges the Alliance must address – which there are — but because it will confront the fundamental question of what NATO is for. Countries like France are openly questioning Article 5, a bedrock principle of the Alliance.

So, the future of NATO turns on this question: how do we stay together in a changing world? Especially when so many NATO members are still clinging to the world order they helped build in the 1990s.

The Glory Days

NATO has never been shy about adapting itself to changing times, and it did so remarkably in the 1990s on the cusp of the reinvention of a liberal international order. This was not some grandiose plan hatched on paper and cheered on by academics who made entire careers on “the return to Europe, whole and free.” There were concrete examples of NATO's contribution to building regional and global stability at that time of significant transition, especially in the Balkans.

Those who had their heads buried in the sand, clinging onto the glorified 1990s, consisted largely of North America and the Northern European countries – the “transatlantic core,” so to speak. They were the locomotive that drove the fantastic design of the 1990s, the foundation of which was laid at the OSCE (then CSCE) Charter of Paris at the end of 1990.

Nearly thirty years on, what is the new reality?

NATO at 70

The triumph of absorbing the post-communist space and projecting stability through enlargement and partnership programs waned as the realities of a new age began to set in: a resurgent Russia and activist China; the alteration of the map of the world's trade routes with projects such as the "Belt and Road"; changes in the global patterns of energy suppliers and consumers; the rising importance of the governance of the global commons; new emerging challenges such as hybrid warfare and cyber-attacks; the world of virtual communications and access to information where global terror networks flourish; and last but not least, diverging security priorities between allies.

I warned about those diverging security priorities 10 years ago when NATO was drafting its last strategic concept. These are documents that are intended to give guidance to security planning for the next decade. We are near the end of that decade, yet a new strategic concept that will define the next 10 years of NATO is nowhere in sight.

Different security priorities between allies brings us to one of the most talked about allies recently: Turkey.

Turkey was once a silent, technocratic ally. That's changed dramatically.

Sometimes referred to as the "bad" ally, sometimes the "indispensable," the "crucial" ally, what was once a "functional" ally, that then became the United States' "strategic partner," but only in name. Even its multitude of contradictory attributes, ought to tell us that in fact, Turkey has been the most "misunderstood" ally. Perhaps this is the most correct adjective of all.

This is likely due to the way Turkey plodded on in silence while the Alliance went through its several decades of transformation. Turkey carried on with its various contributions to the Alliance in the most critical places from the Balkans to Afghanistan, without being much in the forefront of a transatlantic shaped world order. It was largely a technocratic, silent ally. This is how it came to be viewed as the "functional" ally. Functional because of its unique geostrategic location and the military asset of being the second largest army in NATO.

Beyond that, it was not party to the larger strategic planning of perpetuating world order. As Turkey grew both in terms of its economy, but also as an

important regional power, it also faced increased and dire national security threats. Turkey now borders two states that are still in the throes of turmoil: Iraq and Syria. The latter, which Turkey shares a 915 km border, became the scene of a bloody civil war that has lasted almost a decade, leaving a vacuum for terrorist groups to thrive, as civilians fleeing for their lives fled to the nearest border.

No other NATO country has suffered as much as Turkey from both terrorism and the burden of taking care of nearly 4 million refugees by itself, with minimal help and zero empathy from the international community. Turkey has suffered over and over again from ISIS as well as PKK attacks – all augmented from the vacuum they had found across the border. Turkey's pleas fell on deaf ears. The PKK, recognized as a terrorist organization by the US and the EU, launched attacks in Turkey that left hundreds dead and injured. Yet their supplies, their training, their equipment were all enhanced because of their affiliate organization, the YPG, in Syria. Even the former US Defense Secretary Ash Carter acknowledged that the YPG and the PKK were one and the same in a Senate hearing. The United States made a terrible decision in arming one terrorist organisation to fight another.

The result: their NATO ally Turkey suffered. Yet Turkey plodded on, clearing an area of over 2,000 square kilometers in the North of Syria of ISIS. The largest area cleared by a member of the international coalition against ISIS.

As the YPG set about to create a terrorist state in North Eastern Syria, threatening not only Turkey but also the future unity and territorial integrity of Syria, Turkey launched yet another operation to protect its borders. The screeching narratives of protest against Turkey's right to defend itself from some of Turkey's NATO allies was absurd at best, disturbing at worst. Those allies had more empathy with a terrorist group than their NATO ally.

Framing this as Turkey's "fight against Kurds" was deliberate, because I find it very hard to believe that such a stupendous remark could be based on pure ignorance.

While Turkey was facing attacks from two terrorist organizations directly linked to the Syrian war across the border, it also suffered a major coup attempt that left over 200 of its citizens dead. Still, there was little or no empathy in the initial stages as Turkey recovered from that terrible night, from the international

community but above all, those NATO allies, that Turkey protected all those years.

Finally, Turkey sought for over a decade to meet its own serious national security requirement of missile and air defense. Its request to buy U.S. Patriots was turned by multiple allies. After looking at various other options, it settled for the Russian S-400 system. This by no means a threat to NATO, nor is it a NATO issue. A standalone system need not be integrated into NATO systems.

Yet, all of this, once again, has fallen on deaf ears. So, we now near the London summit. NATO has continued on auto pilot for much of these 25 years. Communiques have been drafted and redrafted based on previous ones. No one has done any thinking outside the box. Yet, it is also the most successful military alliance in history, and holds the largest insurance policy: Article 5 protection for its members states.

Despite the fact that Turkey has been let down by NATO member states these past few years, over and over again, Turkey has never questioned the validity of Article 5 – unlike France. Even when Turkey shot down a Russian jet that strayed into its airspace during the Syrian conflict and found very little response from its allies. Even when mortars landed time and time again from across the border, killing Turkish citizens. Even when terrorist bombs exploded, killing Turkish civilians and security forces, over and over again, Turkey never questioned the value of NATO.

Challenging NATO to think out of the box is a good thing and much needed. But to what purpose? Since the 1990s, France has had a Europeanist outlook to NATO, one that could exist side by side or even be sidelined by a European defense. While Europe is still very far from the goal of an effective European army, this still is something which France aspires to lead.

Turkey, on the other hand, has always favored an Atlanticist vision of European security, where NATO remains the main instrument for Europe's defense. If NATO can reconcile security priorities between allies, and return to its basics, which is security for all, not some, then we can look forward to working together on a series of issues to which NATO is best suited for.

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